

Developing and Maintaining a Web Presence

by Cindie Gruetzmacher

Having successfully brought your company through the Year 2000 (Y2K) bug portal, the next big techno-step for this twenty-first century is to open your doors to the world via the World Wide Web. You've seen a plethora of information on the Internet since you got wired—you are connected (?)—including your vendors' product information, useful tools for tracking shipments, and everything you did or did not want to know about your competitors. With a twinge of justified pride, you may say, "Our business has had a well-established website for years." Maybe those virtual doors need a little

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polishing. Let's take a look at constructing the company website, the importance of updating the site, and how you might do it all yourself.

Laying the Groundwork

What do you want to ultimately do with your website? Will it provide general or detailed information to customers? Do you plan to have

interactive pages or add a storefront? For ideas, cruise the Internet for sites you like. Thumb through *Cleaner Times* or check out your trade organization's web for industry-related sites. Knowing what you want to achieve will help you and your web developer decide what design software to use and which services you'll need from a web host. Decide who will make up the web team, including who will handle Webmaster duties and those who will provide content.

A web host is the company on whose computer your web pages will reside and to whom you will pay a monthly hosting fee of \$15–\$50

and up. Be choosy when selecting a web host because if you pick one whose servers are down a lot, your website will be dropped from

search engines—if it even gets listed to start with! Your Internet Service Provider (ISP) may offer hosting services and so might the local Ma Bell. Find more hosts in the *Yellow Pages* or in Internet directories like WebHost Directory (www.webhostdir.com), HostSearch (www.hostsearch.com), and TopHosts (www.tophosts.com).

A web-hosting package includes email accounts, X-MB of disk space on the host's server, and X-MB of site traffic. Pick a package offering adequate amounts because if disk space is exceeded, you'll be charged for the overage, and when traffic hits the limit, your site may lock potential customers out—bad for search engine ratings. A good web host will provide site reports including disk usage, how and when the site is being accessed, hit logs, error logs, browser logs, etc. Some hosts offer e-commerce capabilities, allowing you/your developer to set up an online storefront with a product catalog and tax calculators for as little as \$20 a month.

Get your domain name registered. Your web host can do this or you can at a registration site like VeriSign (www.netsol.com), Register.com (www.register.com), Domain.com (www.domain.com), or, for a ".us" domain, visit .US (www.nic.us). The domain name is usually the company name, and descriptive words in the name will help people find your site. A good example is Cat Pumps (www.catpumps.com). The name of their product, "pumps," is in the domain name and will rank high in a search result. If your company name doesn't include descriptives,

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Table 1 – Use this table to help organize the process of your web’s development.

Domain Name:						Date Registered:		
Registered With:						Date Registration Good Through:		
Domain Alias (optional):								
Web Team:								
Scope of Site:								
Short-range Goal:								
Long-range Goal:								
Approximate Number of Pages:						Images Planned:		
Web Creation Software:								
Web Host Prospects:	Software Supported	# Email Accounts	MB Disk Space	MB Site Traffic	Reports Offered:	Customer Support	Store-front Support	Domain Aliasing

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don’t despair. Consider creating a domain alias using a more descriptive variation of the company name. It will be higher in search engine results and will still point customers to your website. (See Table 1.)

Developing the Content

Once the domain is registered and a web host is secured, several days will pass before “pointers” will allow access to your web—a good time to build the layout, navigation, and overall ambiance of the site. What images and text will fill the pages? How much product and company detail will you share? Will you post spec sheets? Do you want products viewed by product line or some other way? Will you post helpful hints for product usage, a calendar of events

for product training, or maybe a timeline for product suggested maintenance? How do you want to be contacted, and what information would you like to gather from prospective customers? The website is your company’s virtual real estate—it should be an extension of what you are all about. Keep the needs, likes, etc. of the target audience in mind. Grab the web team, put pencil to paper, and brainstorm away.

An initial site would include the homepage, normally the gateway into your web, product, service, company history, and feedback pages. All pages should share the same look so customers know they are still at your site as they move from page to page, and each page should display contact information. Include navigation menus on all pages so

customers can easily find their way around. Keep images small to promote quicker downloads, or risk losing customers to competitor sites that don’t eat up their valuable time.

There is no perfect website. Grand diversity is the wonder of the Internet. View examples of different elements at some industry-related sites: Alklean Industries’ image-rich opening page for pressure washers (www.alklean.com/prwashrs.htm), Anti-Graffiti Systems’ product-related artwork (www.graffiti-solutionsusa.com), AR North America’s technical training sign up page (www.arnorthamerica.com/training.html), Barens’ easily navigable product catalog (www.barens.com/cgi-bin/webcat?group=), Hydro Tek Systems’ online manuals

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(www.hydroteksystems.com/ti-manuals.htm), Mosmatic's multi-lingual site (www.mosmatic.com), Pro Chem of DFW's animations and specials (www.prochemofdfw.com), Soap Warehouse's online purchasing (www.soap-warehouse.com/html-site/buyproducts.asp), Tomahawk USA's feedback form (www.tomahawkusa.com/feedback.html), and Vacu-Boom's comprehensive "Frequently Asked Questions" (www.vacuboom.com/v-faqs.html).

You and your developer should invest time creating good meta tags. A meta tag is html code placed within the head tags of a web page, which, in addition to page content, search engines use to index your site for future reference. Optimization of tags and content will increase the value your site has in search results. The title tag yields the page title in a reader's browser window and the text of a bookmark/favorite that's created to the site. The description tag should describe the products/services your company offers and provides the text displayed in most search engine results. The keywords tag has lost some importance because of abuse but shouldn't be neglected. Keywords should be descriptive words that customers will use when trying to seek out your products and services.

Maintaining the Web

Your website should continue to grow over time and may not become mature until after a year or two. Even then, update your website at least once a month if you want to keep attracting your regular customers—don't bore them into going to a competitor's site. A website, to me, is like a living thing. You must nurture and exercise it, give it lots of attention, and allow it to interact with friends via hyperlinks. Inactive sites will be dropped from search engines.

It's amazing how many cleaning industry webs I came across in which a "Not Found" page came up when I clicked on a link within the site.

Outside pages you web links to also may change URLs. Clean up bad links because search engines don't like them and will drop your site.

Don't forget to check your site's traffic and log reports periodical-ly to see how popular it's become. Notice, too, if there's a sudden slump in activity, possibly due to site stagnation.

Search Engines and Directories

The only way to be found anonymously on the WWW is through use of search engines and web directories. That is, someone may want a cleaning chemical in Idaho and, not knowing who you are, may pull up the directory Yahoo! and search for "cleaning chemicals Idaho." Hopefully you are at the top of the search results so he clicks on your site, admires your products, and proceeds to make a purchase. Notice ways previously mentioned that get you dumped from search engines/directories. Don't subscribe to trickery within your site either because that will knock you out as well.

How then do you get listed with these finicky companies? The best way to get listed is to submit your site to the chosen engines/directories and follow each set of rules exactly. Most search engines have spiders or robots that crawl around your site gathering information and then carry it back to wherever they came from. Most directories use humans to gather data and discern who is in or out. The rules are always changing, too. In fact, many engines/directories now charge to submit a commercial site. Yahoo! charges a non-refundable \$299 annual fee, even if your site is rejected by the humans who review it (docs.yahoo.com/info/suggest). LookSmart (www.LookSmart.com) charges a \$49 set-up fee and a minimum \$150 account fee from which \$.15 click-through fees are debited. You can still register free at Altavista (www.altavista.com/addurl). Popular Google (adwords.google.com/select/overview.html) has an AdWords Select program in which you decide how much you

want to pay per day for each click-through. That budget will also define your ranking in a search result. Google, and many others, share results with other engines/directories, as mapped in Bruce Clay's "Search Engine Relationship Chart" (bruceclay.com/search-enginechart.pdf). Don't even think about submitting your site until the meta tags and meat of your site are in place. If you want to boost traffic in the interim, get other sites to post links to yours, such as the Chamber of Commerce or other organization you are a member of. These external links will further increase your search engine ranking.

Web on a Shoestring

If you want to do it yourself, but worry because you don't know html code, fear not! You can create web pages with any software that lets you save a file as .html, such as most word processing and publishing software. Netscape Communicator comes with Composer, which creates html files. Popular web authoring software packages include MS FrontPage and Macromedia Dreamweaver.

Don't use a free web host—which there are many. You won't get decent search rankings, you may not be able to use your domain name, and ads might be placed on your site. A good fee-based web host may offer a web template and will provide better support.

Overall

A lot goes on behind the scenes of a well-tended, viable website. Once accessed through a search result, external link, or URL type-in, the presentation of the content provides the draw. Interesting and valuable information may keep a customer at your site, but only if it is easy to navigate and downloads pages quickly. Online customer support forms, handy references, and new data postings will keep 'em coming back for more.

Cindie Gruetzmacher has been providing IT support for small businesses since 1990. She emphasizes optimizing system resources and user knowledge in an effort to improve overall efficiency. ☛